What is claimed is:

1. A pod for holding a circular reticle, comprising:

a base having a respective interior surface;

a cover having a respective interior surface and being attached to the base in a manner allowing the cover to open and close relative to the base and to define, cooperatively with the base whenever the cover is closed, an internal space between the respective interior surfaces, the internal space being sized to accommodate the reticle within the internal space;

three reticle-support blocks mounted to the interior surface of the base, the reticle-support blocks being arranged substantially equi-distantly from each other so as to support the reticle at three respective locations in a tripod manner in a peripheral handling zone on an under-surface of the reticle, each reticle-support block defining a respective reticle-contact surface that contacts the respective location in the handling zone whenever the reticle has been placed on the reticle-support blocks; and

three compliant reticle-contact members mounted to the interior surface of the cover so as to be positioned, whenever the cover is closed, opposite a respective reticle-contact surface on an upper surface of the reticle, each reticle-contact member being non-adhesive and configured to apply, whenever the cover is closed, a reticle-holding force directed from the reticle-contact member to the respective reticle-contact surface.

2. The pod of claim 1, wherein each reticle-contact member is mounted to a respective pressure-application member mounted to a respective mounting location on the interior surface of the cover.

3. The pod of claim 2, wherein:

the cover defines more than three mounting locations; and

the three pressure-application members are mounted to respective mounting locations among the more than three mounting locations provided on the cover.

4. The pod of claim 2, wherein each pressure-application member comprises a flat spring having a proximal end mounted to the respective mounting location on the interior surface of the cover and a distal end to which the respective reticle-contact member is mounted.

5. The pod of claim 4, wherein:

each flat spring is triangular in profile, with a short side and two long sides;

the short side is on the proximal end of the flat spring; and

the respective reticle-contact members are mounted to an intersection of the two long sides.

6. The pod of claim 5, wherein:

each flat spring has a different size and shape; and

each flat spring applies a similar magnitude of reticle-holding force, *via* the respective reticle-contact members, to the respective locations in the handling zone.

7. The pod of claim 6, wherein the reticle-holding forces are normal in direction to the respective reticle-contact surfaces.

8. The pod of claim 1, wherein the reticle-holding forces are normal in direction to the respective reticle-contact surfaces.

9. The pod of claim 1, further comprising a toroidal ring-shaped member mounted to the interior surface of the base, wherein the reticle-support blocks are mounted to the ring-shaped member.

10. The pod of claim 9, wherein the reticle-support blocks are equi-angularly arranged on the ring-shaped member.

11. The pod of claim 9, further comprising at least three mounting pads situated between the ring-shaped member and the interior surface of the base, wherein the mounting pads are mounted to the interior surface of the base and the ring-shaped member is mounted to the mounting pads.

12. The pod of claim 11, wherein the mounting pads are configured to align the ring-shaped member with the base.

13. The pod of claim 1, wherein the reticle-support blocks are arranged so as not to interfere with a sensor used for determining whether a reticle is contained inside the reticle pod.

14. The pod of claim 1, further comprising a reticle aligner situated and configured to align the reticle with respect to the pod whenever the reticle is contained in the pod.

15. The pod of claim 14, wherein:

the reticle aligner comprises a protrusion defined in one of the reticle-support blocks; and

the protrusion is situated and configured to engage an edge notch in the reticle whenever the reticle is being held in the pod.

16. The pod of claim 15, wherein the protrusion is configured to engage a SEMI-standard edge notch.

17. The pod of claim 1, wherein at least two of the reticle-support blocks include, on their respective reticle-contact surfaces, respective stop pins situated and configured to engage an edge of the reticle whenever the reticle is being held in the pod.

18. The pod of claim 17, wherein:

two of the reticle-support blocks include respective stop pins;

a third reticle-support block defines a protrusion; and

the protrusion is situated and configured to engage an edge notch in the reticle whenever the reticle is being held in the pod.

19. The pod of claim 1, wherein each reticle-contact member comprises a respective O-ring that edgewise contacts the respective location in the handling zone.

20. The pod of claim 1, wherein the pressure-application members are selected from the group consisting of spring members and elastomeric members.

21. A pod for holding a circular reticle, comprising:

a base having a respective interior surface;

a cover having a respective interior surface and being attached to the base in a manner allowing the cover to open and close relative to the base and to define, cooperatively with the base whenever the cover is closed, an internal space between the respective interior surfaces, the internal space being sized to accommodate a circular reticle within the internal space; and

three reticle-support blocks mounted to the interior surface of the base, the reticle-support blocks being arranged substantially equi-distantly from each other so as to support the reticle at three respective locations in a tripod manner in a peripheral handling zone on an under-surface of the reticle, each reticle-support block defining a respective reticle-contact surface that contacts the respective location in the handling zone whenever the reticle has been placed on the reticle-support blocks, wherein at least one of the reticle-support blocks comprises a reticle aligner configured to align the reticle with respect to the pod whenever the reticle is contained in the pod.

22. The pod of claim 21, wherein:

the reticle aligner comprises a protrusion defined in one of the reticle-support blocks; and

the protrusion is situated and configured to engage an edge notch in the reticle whenever the reticle is being held in the pod.

23. The pod of claim 22, wherein the protrusion is configured to engage a SEMI-standard edge notch.

24. The pod of claim 21, wherein at least two of the reticle-support blocks include, on their respective reticle-contact surfaces, respective stop pins situated and configured to engage an edge of the reticle whenever the reticle is being held in the pod.

25. The pod of claim 24, wherein:

two of the reticle-support blocks include respective stop pins;

a third reticle-support block defines a protrusion; and

the protrusion is situated and configured to engage an edge notch in the reticle whenever the reticle is being held in the pod.

26. A method for holding a circular reticle having an upper surface, a lower surface, and a peripheral handling zone extending around at least a portion of the circumference of the reticle, the method comprising:

on respective reticle-contact surfaces, supporting the reticle at three locations in the handling zone on the lower surface of the reticle, the locations being substantially an equal distance from one another; and

compliantly imparting, in respective directions normal to the respective reticle-contact surfaces, respective reticle-holding forces at respective locations in the handling zone on the upper surface of the reticle.

27. The method of claim 26, further comprising establishing and maintaining an alignment of the reticle as the reticle is being held.

28. The method of claim 27, wherein the step of establishing and maintaining an alignment of the reticle comprises engaging a protrusion into an edge notch in the reticle.

29. The method of claim 26, wherein the reticle-holding forces are equal in magnitude.

30. The method of claim 26, wherein the reticle-holding forces are parallel to each other.

31. The method of claim 26, further comprising the step of containing the reticle, as the reticle is being held on the reticle-contact surfaces, in a reticle pod serving to isolate the reticle from an external environment.

32. The method of claim 31, further comprising the step of configuring the reticle pod with a base and a cover, wherein the cover is openable relative to the base.

33. The method of claim 32, further comprising the step of aligning the reticle-contact surfaces relative to the base.

34. A microlithography system, comprising:

an optical column configured to receive a circular reticle; and

a reticle pod, comprising (i) a base having a respective interior surface; (ii) a cover having a respective interior surface and being attached to the base in a manner allowing the cover to open and close relative to the base and to define, cooperatively with the base whenever the cover is closed, an internal space between the respective

interior surfaces, the internal space being sized to accommodate a circular reticle within the internal space; (iii) three reticle-support blocks mounted to the interior surface of the base, the reticle-support blocks being arranged substantially equi-distantly from each other so as to support the reticle at three respective locations in a tripod manner in a peripheral handling zone on an under-surface of the reticle, each reticle-support block defining a respective reticle-contact surface that contacts the respective location in the handling zone whenever the reticle has been placed on the reticle-support blocks; and (iv) three compliant reticle-contact members mounted to the interior surface of the cover so as to be positioned, whenever the cover is closed, opposite a respective reticle-contact surfaces on an upper surface of the reticle, each reticle-contact member being compliant, non-adhesive, and configured to apply, whenever the cover is closed, a reticle-holding force directed from the reticle-contact member to the respective reticle-contact surface.

35. A microlithography system, comprising:

an optical column configured to receive a circular reticle; and

a reticle pod, comprising (i) a base having a respective interior surface; (ii) a cover having a respective interior surface and being attached to the base in a manner allowing the cover to open and close relative to the base and to define, cooperatively with the base whenever the cover is closed, an internal space between the respective interior surfaces, the internal space being sized to accommodate a circular reticle within the internal space; and (iii) three reticle-support blocks mounted to the interior surface of the base, the reticle-support blocks being arranged substantially equi-distantly from each other so as to support the reticle at three respective locations in a tripod manner in a peripheral handling zone on an under-surface of the reticle, each reticle-support block defining a respective reticle-contact surface that contacts the respective location in the handling zone whenever the reticle has been placed on the reticle-support blocks, wherein at least one of the reticle-support blocks comprises a reticle aligner configured to align the reticle with respect to the pod whenever the reticle is contained in the pod.